

# CHIP expansion passes US House 289-139

By MIKE DENNISON - IR State Bureau - 01/15/09

The U.S. House Wednesday overwhelmingly passed a bill to expand the Children's Health Insurance Program, which should provide health coverage for up to 20,000 additional children in Montana.

U.S. Rep. Denny Rehberg, R-Mont., voted for the measure, which passed on a 289-139 vote.

A Senate version of the proposal, which may be among the first bills to reach the desk of Barack Obama after he becomes president next week, is scheduled to be taken up Thursday before the Senate Finance Committee.

"It would be good to get this issue behind us so we can move on," Rehberg said Wednesday afternoon after the House vote. "I don't see any reason for it to be held up."

He said the Children's Health Insurance Program is a "great example of what happens when we put aside partisanship to find workable solutions to our shared problems."

Quick passage of the measure also will help policymakers in Montana move forward on implementing a voter-passed state initiative to cover as many as 30,000 additional children the next few years, by expanding CHIP and Medicaid.

The bill approved Wednesday by the House increases CHIP funding by \$32 billion nationwide, enough to cover an additional 4 million kids from low- and moderate-income children. The program currently covers about 7 million children.

The expansion would be financed by an increase in federal cigarette taxes of 61 cents to a \$1.

Meanwhile, U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., has put forth his own version of the CHIP expansion. It will be heard today before the Finance Committee, which he chairs.

Baucus' proposal, unveiled Tuesday, resembles the House plan, containing a 61-cents-per-pack increase in cigarette taxes and commensurate increases for other tobacco taxes. He said passage of the bill is "a heck of a good start towards getting all Americans health insurance."

"Renewing CHIP is the right medicine for the times," he said in a statement. "I'm confident that with the new Congress and the new administration, we can help kids who need it most."

Federal authorization for CHIP is set to expire in March; a new bill would reauthorize and expand the program.

The Baucus bill would provide about \$32.4 million in CHIP funding for Montana, or 124 percent more than provided under current law.

The measure is expected to pass out of the Finance Committee and be taken up by the full Senate in the next two weeks, Baucus staffers said Wednesday.

Obama said after Wednesday's House vote that he hopes the Senate acts with the "same sense of urgency so that it can be one of the first measures I sign into law when I am president."

"In this moment of crisis, ensuring that every child in America has access to affordable health care is not just good economic policy, but a moral obligation we hold as parents and citizens," the president-elect said.

While Rehberg supported the bill, he said he thought the 4.5-year extension was an odd time segment, and wondered whether it might be timed to fit in with broader health care reform that is based on expanding government-funded coverage.

Rehberg said he has always leaned toward a combination of private- and public-sector solutions to the problem of the uninsured and lack of access to affordable health care.